



UIL Policy Brief 2

Youth matters: Equipping vulnerable young people with literacy and life skills

The global youth challenge

There are more than one billion young people worldwide aged between 15 and 24, representing the largest cohort that has ever had to progress from childhood to adulthood. Almost 87 per cent of them live in developing countries (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2011). As many as 123 million of this generation, 61 per cent of them girls, were reported to be illiterate in 2011 (UIS, 2013).

Young people who have never been to school or those who have dropped out (or been “pushed out”) are among the most vulnerable. Being excluded from basic education puts a wide range of opportunities beyond their reach. In today’s world of disparities in social, economic and technological resources, this is

not only limiting their life chances (including access to formal quality education, technical and vocational training and employment) but also their potential contribution to their own country’s development.

Global information on youth (age 15-24):

- Adolescents out of school: 70 million in 2010, 48% were girls (UNESCO, 2012)
- Nearly 9 out of 10 illiterate youths were concentrated in two regions: South and West Asia (62 million) and sub-Saharan Africa (48 million) (UIS, 2013)
- Unemployed youth: estimated 73 million in 2013 (ILO, 2013).
- Among new HIV infections of people aged 15 and older: the age cohort 15-24 accounted for 42% in 2010 (UNAIDS, 2012).

Governments’ commitment

The enabling role of education and training programmes, especially in preparing vulnerable young people and adults for coping with personal, social and economic challenges,

was emphasised in the outcome document of the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI), the Belém Framework for Action. This document, adopted by 144 UNESCO Member States in 2009, highlights the right to education for young people and adults as well as the importance of harnessing the power and potential of youth learning for the peaceful and sustainable development of their societies (UIL, 2010).

Literacy and life skills to address vulnerability

As they transit from dependence to independence, youth need to manage a complex interplay of physical, socio-psychological and cultural changes. They need to negotiate their

way through different life-changing phases, such as learning after primary school age, starting a productive working life, adopting a healthy lifestyle, forming a (new) family or exercising citizenship. Although these stages of transition vary enormously from one context to another, they all put young boys and girls into a position that makes them more vulnerable than adults. Gender is an important determinant of vulnerability, together with other factors like socio-economic status and ethnic affiliation.

Literacy and life skills are widely recognised as the basis for any kind of further learning. According to the *World Declaration on Education for All*, basic learning needs “comprise both essential learning tools (such as literacy, oral expression, numeracy and problem solving) and the basic learning content [...] required by human beings to be able to survive, to develop their full capacities, to live and work in dignity, to participate fully in development, to improve the quality of their lives, to make informed decisions and to continue learning” (UNESCO, 1990, Art I. 1.). More than 20 years later, addressing the literacy and life skills needs of vulnerable youth takes on a more urgent tone if we want to secure their full participation in society.



Policies for vulnerable youth

Prioritising vulnerable youth in policy formulation is a complex process, which requires the active and sustained participation of all stakeholders. Ideally, young people need to be involved so that their voices are heard and their capacities built at the same time.

Policies directed towards youth face a challenge as they attempt to address a certain age cohort. There is no international consensus on the age range of what is considered as youth. In the African Union, the period from 15 to 35 years is defined as “youth”, while in the European Union it is from 15 to 29 years. The United Nations system, for statistical purposes, defines



youth as persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years (UNESCO, 2012). Within individual countries, government agencies have their own mandates on which specific age range they work with.

To identify how countries are addressing vulnerable youth in their policies and programmes, a multi-country research on Literacy and Life Skills Education for Vulnerable Youth was initiated in 2010¹. Taken together with two regional policy forums, it yielded examples of which policies and programmes are in place and now enables us to cull certain lessons for effective policies:

Making specific provisions for vulnerable youth

Cambodia's youth policy seeks to protect youth at risk, through vocational, technical and life skills. It covers critical thinking, information-gathering, problem-solving, decision-making, negotiation and learning "how to learn". The national youth policy of **Tanzania** focuses on unemployed youth, those who have run away from home, girls who are subject to harmful traditional practices like female genital mutilation, early marriage and pregnancy. Another example is **Haiti's** National Health Policy for Youth, which is based on a situation analysis carried out in 1999 in which the most vulnerable youth were identified. It specifically mentions street children, child labourers, abandoned children, orphans, child prostitutes and disabled children. It also aims to guarantee young people's right to health and proposes to bestow this right through education and awareness to enhance knowledge, change values and impart life skills.

¹ To inform CONFINTEA VI follow-up activities, a multi-country research and policy-dialogue process entitled "Literacy and Life Skills Education for Vulnerable Youth" was initiated by UIL in cooperation with the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) in August 2010. Two Policy Forums (one in Bamako, Mali and another in Cairo, Egypt in 2011) were held to gather evidence on how to effectively address the provision of literacy and life skills to vulnerable youth in policy design in view of increasing their participation.

Making youth everybody's business

Brazil's National Policy involves different stakeholders so it provides a clear delineation of roles and responsibilities. The National Youth Council formulates and proposes guidelines for government action on promoting youth policies and promotes studies and research on young people's socio-economic reality. It is made up of 60 members, 40 from civil society and 20 from the Federal government. Meanwhile the National Youth Secretariat is the office responsible for young people at Federal Government level and government programmes and activities. In **Bangladesh**, the institution responsible for the National Youth Policy is the Ministry of Youth. The country policy emphasises ICT, leadership skills and training manpower.

Making room for young peoples' participation

Ethiopia's youth policy was developed by a task force led by the Government and composed of representatives of government institutions, youth associations, NGOs and experts in education, health and other sectors. It is noteworthy that more than half of the participants were young people. **Timor-Leste** illustrates how a government created a mechanism such as the "Youth Parliament" to continuously ensure that young people have a voice in the development of their National Youth Policy. The "Youth Parliament" is a platform for young people including vulnerable youth to guarantee the representation of their interests in national decision-making processes.





Programmes for vulnerable youth

Cognisant of the fact that most vulnerable groups need to be equipped with the necessary skills to become change agents for a viable future, the challenges for government and non-governmental groups start with identifying these groups and reaching them through specific programmes. The review of the effective practices shows that despite diverse settings and contexts, the programmes have some common elements of practice:

Mapping vulnerable youth

YouthMap, a programme run by the International Youth Foundation (IYF, 2011), is an initiative designed to assess youth circumstances and support promising youth development programmes and practices. In the case of **Senegal**, the assessments focus on transitions from adolescence to adulthood in the areas of education, work, health, family formation and citizenship. Each assessment includes research questions tailored to specific youth circumstances.

Embedding literacy with life skills and vocational education

In **Nepal**, the “Farmer Field School” Project targets those girls who have not been to schools, providing a nine-month literacy course which includes an introduction to eco-friendly farming techniques to increase the crop yield. Side by side with teaching reading, writing and performing basic calculations, the course also covers information on nutrition, reproductive health, consequences of early marriage, unsafe sex and HIV/AIDS.

Involving vulnerable youth at different stages of programme formulation

In **Liberia**, the Youth Education Pack Project (YEP), implemented by the Norwegian Refugee Council, addresses youth who missed out on education opportunities due to the war. To

determine curriculum components, the community and the youth themselves are involved. Besides literacy and numeracy, the life skills programme consists of health education, peace education, human rights, psychosocial support and entrepreneurship skills. Some **Indian** NGOs have worked with *dalits* (the former “untouchable” community) and youth from indigenous tribes and have assisted them in forming associations. Through this, self-confidence is built and the youth acquire capabilities which allow them to participate as equals.

In order to increase participation of vulnerable youth, a favourable policy environment and well-targeted programmes are indispensable. To allow governments and NGOs to respond to the diverse learning needs of vulnerable youth, the latter’s active involvement in all phases of policy and programme development needs to be factored in. UNESCO has prioritised youth and puts a high premium on their participation at all levels. Governments together with their partners are showing us this can be done.

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